

THE WIDE WORLD MAGAZINE.

Vol. I.

APRIL, 1898.

No. 1.

The Romance of Seal Hunting.

AN INTERVIEW WITH SIR GEORGE BADEN-POWELL, K.C.M.G., ETC.

By WILLIAM G. FITZGERALD.



HE average man who knows little about the seal beyond what he has to pay for his wife's coat will, it is pretty safe to predict, be somewhat astonished by the photographs and information set forth in this article.



SIR GEORGE BADEN-POWELL, K.C.M.G., ETC.
From a Photo. by Norman May & Co., Cheltenham.

As far back as 1886 that well-known statesman and yachtsman, Sir George Baden-Powell, was staying on the coast of California when he heard that some American war-ships had seized three British sealing schooners. Sir George at once went up along the coast interviewing the inhabitants and the American sealers at San Francisco, who were one and all very angry at the arbitrary proceedings of the United States Government. Our own authorities, however, did not seem particularly anxious to move in the matter, and for the next two or three years the Americans still went on seizing schooners. They contended that Behring Sea belonged to them, as they had bought all rights from the Russians.

In 1891 the American Government gave notice that they were sending up several men-

of-war to seize every vessel of any kind whatsoever that came into Behring Sea. Then it was that Lord Salisbury decided to act.

"Early one Sunday morning," said Sir George Baden-Powell to the present writer, as he paced his study in Eaton Square, "I was awakened from sleep by my man, who informed me that a messenger from 'Mr. Hatfield' was waiting downstairs for an immediate answer to a note he had brought. I told my servant I did not know anyone of the name of Hatfield, and didn't want to be disturbed. Noticing the word 'Hatfield' on the envelope, I found the letter was a despatch from the Marquis of Salisbury, which I forthwith opened. The Government had decided at once to send a British Commissioner to inquire into the Behring Sea troubles. Would I go? I promptly consented, and the necessary arrangements were made so rapidly, that I sailed for New York a few days after the receipt of 'Mr. Hatfield's' letter. On the steamer going out I had piles of papers and documents on the subject to read."

After conferring with the British authorities



DR. "KLONDIKE" DAWSON, WHO ACCOMPANIED SIR GEORGE.
From a Photo. by Norman & Sons, Montreal.

in Washington, Sir George went on to Ottawa, where he met Dr. George M. Dawson, the well-known Canadian scientist, who was to be his fellow Commissioner. As everybody knows, Dr. Dawson is geologist for the Canadian Government, and so important a part has he taken in the development of British Columbia and the North-West Territories, that it is after him that Dawson City—the metropolis of the Klondike—is named.

"After consulting the Canadian Ministers in Ottawa," pursued Sir George, "I crossed the Continent to Vancouver and Victoria, where I held pre-arranged interviews with experienced sealers. As soon as the chartered steamer *Danube* was ready, we sailed direct to the port of Iliuliuk, in the Island of Ounalaska. Altogether, our cruise in the North Pacific occupied nearly three months, during which time, according to the log, we traveled some 9,000 miles, mostly in fogs, gales, and very invigorating cold."

The fur seal of the North Pacific is essentially a sea animal, but for some part of the year it has to come on land at certain breeding-places where the young are brought forth. The seals of the North Pacific travel north to the breeding-grounds in the spring and return southward in

the autumn, following two main lines—one skirting the western coast of North America, and the other the Asiatic coast. The seals which take the former route for the main part breed in the Pribyloff Islands in summer, and spend the winter in that part of the ocean near the coast of British Columbia. The seals that follow the second route mainly breed on the Commander Islands and winter off the coast of Japan.

The breeding males begin to arrive on the Pribyloffs at various dates in May, and they remain continuously ashore for about three months. The females arrive nearly a month later. The "pups" are born in June and July, and commence to herd by themselves away from their mothers towards the middle or end of August. They frequent the beach in great numbers, and bathe or swim in the surf. But the photograph which is here reproduced will give one an absolutely exact idea of how the seals bask on the beach in the sunlight on Zoltoi sands in St. Paul's Island, one of the Pribyloffs.

"The Americans had told us," remarked Sir George Baden-Powell as he looked at this photograph, "that the seals were pretty well exterminated on the Zoltoi sands; they told us that no seals would be found here. You can



SEALS BASKING ON THE BEACH IN ST. PAUL'S ISLAND.

see for yourself what truth there was in this assertion. Fortunately, we had a Government photographer with us to obtain this indisputable evidence. I remember that in order to get this photograph we had to creep up carefully and noiselessly to the top of the dunes overlooking the beach. Had the basking seals heard us coming they would all have taken to the water. Most of the animals you see in this photo. are 'Holluschickie'—that is to say, half-grown males or bachelors. These and a few old bulls are the last to leave the island."

On the Pribyloff and Commander Islands in the North Pacific, large numbers of fur seals have been regularly killed for more than 100 years since the first occupation of these islands by the Russians. In 1868 the Pribyloffs passed into the control of the United States. Then came much indiscriminate slaughter, and, although for a great number of years certain restrictions were imposed, it was not until the year 1875 that the first note of warning was sounded about the economy of seal life. In 1870 the Pribyloffs were leased by the United States to the Alaska Commercial Company, who were allowed to kill 100,000 males annually. The result of this tremendous slaughter was very quickly noticeable. Monsieur Grebnitzky, Superintendent of the Commander Islands, and himself a great seal naturalist, declared that when the proportion of females exceeded ten to each mature male, he considered that too many males were being killed, and that each "harem" should in no case contain more than twenty females.

"Now, however," remarked Sir George, "the harems in the Pribyloffs are yearly growing larger, so that, according to our own observations, it was no uncommon thing to find a single male seal with a harem numbering from forty to fifty, and even as many as sixty to eighty females." By only killing males the natural proportion of the sexes has been upset, which is contrary to all successful experience on cattle ranches, sheep stations, or deer forests.

There are, it seems, two distinct ways of hunting seals—land sealing and pelagic sealing. The former is a very simple business. Men go down in gangs to the beach, and simply drive a number of seals some way inland, and there club them to

death and skin them. Pelagic sealing is a phrase applied especially to the hunting of the fur seal in the open sea, schooners or other small vessels being employed as the basis of operation. This method originated, and has been practised from time immemorial, by the coast natives of British Columbia, South-East Alaska, and the State of Washington.

We asked Sir George whether the seals were in any way dangerous. "The younger seals of both sexes are harmless enough," was the reply, "except that they bite and even kill one another in times of excitement, such as during a 'drive'; but I must say that the old bulls are rather unpleasant customers to deal with. Some of these actually attain the respectable age of twenty years and upwards, and are many times larger than the average female. I saw a great number of old bulls that were larger than a full-sized Polar bear, and one fellow was nearly as big as a cow. Moreover, strange as it may seem, one of these old bull seals will pursue and overtake a man in fifty yards. If, of course, a man has more start than this, he may possibly get away, as the seal cannot maintain a great speed for any distance. These old bulls, however, have been known to bite savagely at a man and hurl him backwards over their head."

Here Sir George Baden-Powell showed us the two very interesting photographs which we reproduce. The first photo. shows an old bull asleep on one of the seal rookeries of the Pribyloff Islands.

"He was a huge, powerful fellow," remarked Sir George; "probably weighing 700lb. or 800lb. When we first saw him he was fast asleep like this on the sands, but I fancy the movements of the photographer must have



AN OLD BULL SEAL ASLEEP.

woke slowly second side of reason was not himself roar, a

It w began schoor Colum vessels vided 1,083 procur the sa States the va £30,0 numb had b numb female many

We cruise tacles sented which graph duced Borgo the se the A

"T Georg flames



SAME OLD BULL SEAL ROUSED BY THE PHOTOGRAPHER.

woke him up. At any rate, he did awake, and slowly raised himself up as you see in the second photo. We could not put a man by the side of him for comparison—for very obvious reasons—but I can assure you that this bull seal was nearly as big as a donkey. When he raised himself up like this, he gave vent to a hoarse roar, and made off in the direction of the sea."

It was in 1878-9 that pelagic or sea sealing began to attract attention, and from four schooners at that time the sealing fleet in British Columbia increased, until in 1891 upwards of fifty vessels were employed in it. These were provided with 370 boats and canoes, manned by 1,083 whites and Indians. The number of skins procured by this fleet in 1891 was 49,615. In the same year the sailing fleet of the United States numbered more than forty vessels, and the value of the catch was rather more than £30,000. Since 1887 the decrease in the number of seals in the Pribyloff Islands, which had been very rapid, has ceased, and the numbers are again steadily increasing. More females are being killed at sea, and not so many males on shore.

We need hardly say that during this prolonged cruise Sir George beheld many strange spectacles; but perhaps the strangest of all is represented by the frontispiece of this Magazine, which is probably the most astounding photograph ever taken. Our frontispiece is reproduced from an instantaneous photograph of Borgosloff, the island which was thrust up from the sea in a single night slightly to the north of the Aleutian chain.

"The natives in those parts," remarked Sir George, "told us one night about strange, weird flames that had been seen rising out of the water

far out at sea. Next day we came upon this awful and mysterious island, which was composed of lava and other volcanic material. The precipice facing you in the picture was upwards of 360ft. high. Fortunately for us a strong wind was blowing, otherwise we might have been choked by the very strong sulphurous fumes which you can see for yourself are being blown away from this wonderful island."

It must be said that avarice is the principal cause of the diminution of the seals. The Alaska Commercial Company exacted the utmost value out of their lease of the Pribyloffs. Soon the larger seals became scarce, and then the standard weight of skins was steadily lowered, so as to include the younger seals in the "killables." Instead of skins weighing 7lb. or 8lb., those of 6lb. and even 4lb. were taken and accepted by the Company as early as 1889. The Government, in the new 1891 lease, have increased the tax on skins from 2dols. 25 cents to 10dols. 25 cents.

But perhaps the most serious cause of waste of seal life on the Pribyloffs just now is the dying of the pups, due chiefly to the presence of "parasitic uncinaria," and also to accidental killing by over-driving and other violence inseparable from driving and clubbing; the trampling to death of pups by the older seals in the stampede; and, lastly, poaching and raids generally. The extraordinary photograph of the Great Seal Rookery on Copper Island, which forms the subject of the full-page illustration reproduced on the next page, will enable the reader to realize that seal poaching, if it could be safely worked, is one of the most profitable kinds of theft imaginable. A glance at this wonderful photo. will show that the beach is literally alive with seals, while thousands more are seen playing in the sea. The Russian rookeries are now so carefully guarded, however, that poaching is practically impossible, but formerly it was conducted in a wholesale manner and in an abominably cruel way.

On Copper Island the killing of young seals for native food has been prohibited for the last seventeen years, and a fine of one hundred roubles is exacted in the case of each female accidentally killed. The name of this island, by



VIEW OF THE GREAT SEAL ROOKERY ON COPPER ISLAND.

(SEA AND SHORE LITERALLY ALIVE WITH SEALS.)

the
was
the
the
Russ
Coss
sho
killi
on
seal
they
fem
con
har
one
the
in
sup
be
sig
pro
on
ho
we
du
A
ar
m
th
n
se
p
d
o

the way, is due to the fact that native copper was originally found in little nuggets along the shore. Copper Island is watched by the Russians on the very best principles. A Cossack Guard is kept there with orders to shoot ruthlessly any persons found illegally killing the seals. This severe order was given on account of the wanton way in which the sealers formerly worked. In the South Seas they used to club every seal, whether male or female, big or little, that scrambled ashore, and consequently in six or seven years' time there was hardly a seal left.

Talking about poaching raids, these were at one time very common in the Pribyloffs. On the night of June 8th, 1891, the special agent in St. Paul's Island reported that a schooner, supposed from her suspicious movements to be on a predatory mission to these waters, was sighted off the east end of the island. This proved to be the *Flying Mist*, but seeing people on shore she stood out to sea again, returning, however, later in the season when the nights were longer, and killing and capturing seals during the night. In the autumn of 1889, the *Allie Algar* raided the Island of St. George, and procured more than 800 skins. Certain members of this same schooner's crew boasted that, in the same year, fifteen men had in one night in five hours killed upwards of 1,000 seals. Another poaching schooner was surprised in the very act of raiding, and she departed hastily, leaving 190 female seals dead on the beach.

One result of this policy of extermination has been to make the seal more pelagic or sea-going in its habits. Few people have any idea of the magnitude of the sealing industry, even at the present day. The buildings, plant, and equipment of the North American Company in the islands of St. Paul and St. George are estimated to be worth 130,000dols. The estimated total value of the British Columbia sailing vessels with their equipment, as they sailed in 1891, was 359,000dols. Add to this amount an estimate of the value of the United States Sailing Fleet in the same year—from 250,000dols. to 300,000dols.—and we get a total for the combined fleet of about 750,000dols. In one year (1891) the American sailing fleet took 68,000 skins at sea.

On the Pribyloff Islands, the whole native population employed in killing seals numbers about 300. At the present day the work is carried on in accordance with most rigorous regulations; and in view of the fact that the virtual extinction of the fur seal in the South Seas is entirely due to the killing having been carried out on shore during the breeding season,

profitable sealing on the Pribyloffs is limited to a period of two months.

The "drives" are now made as short as possible—often not more than half a mile. There is no hurrying about this, and the "drives" are under the personal supervision and responsibility of an officer. There is, however, still room for improvement. Sir George Baden-Powell recommends that all seals not intended to be killed should be separated as soon as possible from each "drive." The actual clubbing, too, should be performed with greater care, so as to avoid injury or death to seals not intended to be taken. As to pelagic or sea sealing the use of rifles for shooting seals should be prohibited, and spears employed instead as the method of capture. Then, again, white hunters should have personal licenses, renewable annually. The maximum number of seals to be taken on the Pribyloffs was recommended to be fixed at 50,000 annually. A close time was also suggested, extending from September 15th to May 1st in each year. During this period it was recommended that all killing should be prohibited, with the additional provision that no sealing vessel should enter Behring Sea before July 1st of each year.

Now, as to the question of the seal's food. The fur seal has been known to eat all kinds of fish, including cod, and even halibut. Its favourite diet, however, is small fish, of which the herring is the most important. Sir George Baden-Powell gathered some very curious facts about the animal's habits:—

"An Aleut foreman in charge of the rookeries on Behring Island said that the young seals began to swallow pebbles when about four months old. It also seems that during the time the seals are on the islands they have a prolonged fast. Colonel J. Murray told us that he examined the stomachs of several hundred young seals killed by the natives for food, but he never found the slightest trace of food in the stomachs of the animals themselves. 'On their arrival in the spring,' Colonel Murray goes on to say, 'the seals are very fat and unweildy, but when they leave after their four months' fast they are very often reduced to one-half their former weight.' The habits of the animal are such as to require a safe terrestrial retreat at the season during which the young are born, and where the little ones may remain undisturbed for three or four months, until such time as they are able to assume the sea-going habits of their parents."

In the next photograph which we reproduce we are looking down on one of the great seal rookeries of Copper Island from some distance up a precipice, whose total height is about 200ft.

The view is a most extraordinary one. The sandy beach is dotted all over with seals, and our eye extends along the wild coast, where the surf is roaring and breaking amidst the rocks.



EXTRAORDINARY VIEW OF A SEAL ROOKERY ON COPPER ISLAND—LOOKING DOWN ON THE BEACH FROM A HEIGHT OF 600'

The sea rookeries on St. Paul's Island are the most important in the Pribyloffs. There is neither tree nor shrub worth speaking of in either St. Paul or St. George; the surface is covered

with grass, moss, and lichen. It seems that the seals are not particular in their choice of a rookery. The only two things they avoid are mud and loose sand. The animals have some curious enemies. On Robben Island large numbers of young pups are killed by the burgomaster gulls, which pick out their eyes. This is so well known that a reward of five kopecks is given for each gull killed. Another danger to the pups is when the adult bull runs amuck and fights. But the most terrible cause of seal mortality

is the "killer-whale." Lieutenant Maynard speaks of a single killer-whale which was found with fourteen young seals in its stomach. Lastly, young seals die of the disease and violence already mentioned.

"At Tolstoi Rookery, in St. Paul's Island," said Sir George, "we ourselves observed, on July 29th, 1891, hundreds of dead pups on the smooth slope some little distance from the

shore. These, on further examination, were shown to have died of an exhausting parasitic disease.

"However well regulated," continued Sir George, "the method adopted of driving fur seals must be cruel and destructive. The animal goes at a short shuffling run, then rests. If the weather is at all warm during the driving, individuals drop out and die; others are smothered or badly bitten by their fellows. It is a grim fact that the killing ground to which the seals are driven is always close to the salting house, so that it may be said that the seals are compelled to carry their own skin from the beach to the warehouse. The drive on St. George's Island is about three miles in extent, the time occupied being from four to six hours, according to the weather. During the drive the animals become very much exhausted, and quite dazed through fear. The effects of driving may be seen along the routes by the significant frequency of skeletons and bones round each rocky place that has to be passed. During the drive the seals flop about in a helpless and frightened manner, emitting hoarse cries. When the killing ground is reached the men provide themselves with wooden clubs, something like the capstan-bar of a ship in size, shape, and weight. The animals are then struck on the head; and expert killers only require to deal one blow. The animals are next skinned expeditiously, and the skins placed in piles on top of each other, with layers of salt in between."

Experts assert that different localities produce different skins. The "Alaska" skin is supposed to come from the Pribiloff Islands, whilst the "Copper" hails from the Commander Islands. Of these, the former has the longer and finer fur. But Sir George tested this by marked skins he brought from the islands, and found the names were given to skins of a certain character, but not according to actual place of origin. The major portion of the Pribiloff catch are two or three year olds, and when the skins are placed together in bundles of two, the

separate packages weigh from 12lb. to 15lb. each.

In the accompanying photograph we see a great number of the skins are rolled up together in pairs in this way, ready for shipment. In this shape they go into the hold of the coast steamer at St. Paul, and are counted out from it at San Francisco.

The process of preparing seal skins for the market—costing on the whole 18s. to 20s. per skin—is a prosperous industry in London.

After investigating affairs in all parts of



PILE OF SKINS WAITING SHIPMENT.

Behring Sea, and consulting with the native and white pelagic sealers from Sitka down to Seattle and with the authorities at Ottawa, Sir George, with his Canadian colleague, proceeded to Washington, he having crossed to England to consult with Lord Salisbury. He was then appointed, in December, 1891, British member of the joint Commission in Washington, and assisted our Ambassador, Sir Julian Pauncefote, in obtaining the Treaty referring all matters in dispute to arbitration. Returning to England, the two Commissioners prepared their full Report to Her Majesty, and then Lord Salisbury appointed Sir George adviser in the preparation of the British case before the Paris Arbitration, in which we achieved a victory particularly memorable, in that it is the only instance in which we have ever won an International Arbitration. And it was acknowledged on all hands that this victory was principally due to the full and exact information obtained as to all right of navigation and fishery in Behring Sea, and also as to fur seals and their habits, by the British Commissioner and his Canadian colleague, whose portraits appear on the first page of this article.